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A New Breed of Predatory Coauthor

Beware the wolf in sheep's clothing

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I recently learned about a new (to me) variety of Predatory Coauthor. In addition to the well-known hazard of the unscrupulous Prof. or Advisor who exploits imbalanced power structures, there exists another menace for the earnest and unsuspecting scholar to evade. Be alert for the Predatory Coauthor Stages/Warning Signs, outlined below:

The Predatory Coauthor will often slink onto the scene while you are immersed in an exciting research project, and likely has a field of expertise that's quite distinct from yours. You might even naively initiate academic collaboration with this character yourself, eager to explore that limited area where your fields overlap.

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Predatory Coauthors have keen abilities to recognize the significance of your work, which may provide a disarmingly-refreshing change from the rest of the undiscerning crowd. The Predatory Coauthor will be eager to collaborate and effusive in their praise of your insights and abilities. Before long, though, they will coax you onto an unfamiliar path. "Just imagine the impact that your discoveries could have if you wrote a trade book for a popular non-fiction audience! I have just the expertise and connections to help you do this! Together we will change the world!"

If you follow the Predatory Coauthor down this path, you may find yourself, briefly, on top of the world, with a tidy book contract that divides the royalties equally between you, and allows a full year for manuscript delivery.

But almost immediately, the dynamic will change. "There is a Book Fair in London in just four months! If we can have the first six chapters completed by then, maybe we can find publishers for simultaneous release in every major global market! Yes, it's true that the first five chapters focus on your expertise, and that you have impending conference travel and a heavy teaching load until summer. Wait…I know! Since I have an open schedule, I can write rough drafts of the first five chapters and then you will only have to edit them for accuracy. I'll just need a few resources to get me started."

Under heavy pressure from Predatory Coauthor and their long-time Publisher, you will concede, and will provide access to your many years' worth of notes, lecture videos, conference papers, and raw data. Ultimately, you will be presented with drafts of the chapters ostensibly representing your expertise that are shockingly-poorly-written, grossly oversimplify your research (to the point that it is gravely inaccurate), and lack references. It will occur to you that the chapters resemble very rough, auto-generated transcripts of the video lectures that you had shared.

In addition to "light editing," your Predatory Coauthor will urge you to add in "foreshadowing" throughout, "to help the reader stay focused on the goal," as well as fictional vignettes designed to illustrate the technical concepts in memorable ways.

There will be squabbles about the real need for accurate representation of the research; and you will strive, fruitlessly, to track down "facts" unfamiliar to your research that have no listed references. There will be dramatic email volleys detailing stress-induced vision loss and "days spent in tears with no sleep," and baffling messages from the Publisher criticizing outdated chapter drafts that you hadn't approved for submission. Predatory Coauthor will threaten to quit the project unless you agree to switch the manuscript from Joint Voice (as in the Proposal) to First Person, with chapter headings now identifying distinct authors (ignoring the fact that no chapters were written exclusively, or even predominantly, by you).

You will persevere, and do your best to herd the unruly chapters into a relatively-accurate and (as requested) foreshadowing/vignette-rich condition. Predatory Coauthor will likely assure you that the references are not important at this stage. You will also provide thoughtful feedback on the one chapter in Predatory Coauthor's area of expertise (which, mystifyingly, is nicely written and well-referenced). The whole batch goes off to the publisher within the early and informal deadline for the London Book Fair.

Two weeks later, (probably, ironically, on the Ides of March), you will receive "feedback" from the Publisher stating that "your" chapters do not meet the Publisher's standards. They are poorly-written, lacking in references, and are oozing with the kinds of foreshadowing and fictional vignettes that the Publisher intensely loathes. The manuscript is not ready for the London Book Fair. However, the Publisher is willing to continue supporting the project, if, and only if, Predatory Coauthor assumes the role of Lead Author, which will necessitate a revision to the royalty distribution in the contract.

You will, obviously, decline this proposal, emphasizing that this book is documenting discoveries made in your own, independent research, and explaining that Predatory Coauthor had contributed equally to the writing of each of the chapters. Predatory Coauthor will blatantly deny this, "if that were true, all the chapters would be of the high quality that you know I produce." You will be stunned and horrified at the blatant lies. *You will grow accustomed to these feelings.*

You will emphasize your commitment to this project and your sincere belief that, with eight months remaining until the contractual delivery date, you and Predatory Coauthor will have plenty of time to craft a manuscript that will meet the standards of all parties.

When it is made clear that you will not approve a revision of the contract in Predatory Coauthor's favor, Predatory Coauthor will withdraw from the contract. You will make clear that, despite all that's transpired, you remain committed to the project. Publisher will, nonetheless,

rescind the contract, stating that they could not envision the book without Predatory Coauthor's contributions.

In attempting to make sense of all that has happened, it occurs to you that the most parsimonious (albeit, most disturbing) explanation, is that Predatory Coauthor was "fleecing" you from the beginning. The pressure to deliver the first six chapters in four months was completely manufactured (the biggest European Book Fair of all is held annually in Frankfurt near the original 12-month contract deadline), and was designed to give Predatory Coauthor full control over the chapter-writing so the intentionally-poorly-written chapters could be designated as "yours," with the goal of manipulating you into relinquishing the equitable contract (although, how equitable is it, really, if the most significant discovery was always solely yours?).

Now (very belatedly) wary of your Predatory Coauthor, you send a written request that "no publication of this material move forward until we have coauthored and published an academic journal article detailing the collaborative work that we both can cite in the future." Predatory Coauthor will respond, in writing, "I totally agree! I will engage with the preparation of the article you describe."

As relieved as you can be after this ordeal, you continue with your independent research. You receive nothing further about the article or any collaborative work from Predatory Coauthor and, thus, assume that they, too, have shifted focus to other areas of research.

One day, likely when Predatory Coauthor has reason to believe that you are under so much stress that you might not have the energy to protest (perhaps your child has just been diagnosed with a brain stem tumor), Predatory Coauthor will pop back into your life to announce that they are launching, entirely on their own, a book with a nearly identical title, and nearly identical Table of Contents to the previous joint Proposal, but is now, in the book's description, claiming that Predatory Coauthor, is responsible, "with collaborators," for the discovery that you made independently and documented through conference presentations, long before Predatory Coauthor ever darkened your door.

At this stage, you will likely need to hire separate Intellectual Property attorneys in multiple different countries, while Predatory Coauthor enjoys collecting pre-order payments for your discovery.

Please, don't let this happen to you. Beware the Predatory Coauthor, before it's too late.

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